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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

OF

PETER WRAXALL,

SECRETARY OF INDIAN AFFAIRS FOR THE PROVINCE OF NEW YORK, AND OF THE FIRST
PROVINCIAL CONGRESS HELD IN ALBANY, IN 1754; AID-DE-CAMP TO SIR WM.
JOHNSON DURING THE CROWN POINT EXPEDITION OF 1755; ETC.

[Communicated to the Albany Institute, April 16, 1866, and May 31, 1870.]

BY DANIEL J. PRATT.

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Wraxall is both a parish and a family name in England, and may readily be traced in one line, as far back as 1731, and much further, doubtless, by those who have access to local genealogical records. The first volume of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, published in 1731, and a number of the subsequent volumes, contain obituary, marriage, business, and literary notices of persons more or less eminent, bearing this surname, among whom the most conspicuous is Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall, who was made a baronet in 1813, in consideration of some service in the British East India Company, but whose reputation is more largely due to the authorship of several biographical and historical memoirs, written in an easy and engaging style, and regarded by reliable judges as works of positive merit, despite the severe criticisms of an Edinburgh reviewer and other zealous defamers. Little is known of the immediate family of Peter Wraxall, or of his relationship to the Wraxalls before referred to, except that his father, John Wraxall, was a resident of the city of Bristol, where most of the persons of that name seem to have

resided. In the absence of authentic records, it may be presumed that Peter Wraxall belonged to the generation next succeeding Sir Nathaniel, and that the two may have been as nearly related as second cousins. Nothing has, as yet, been ascertained concerning the early life, education and adventures of the subject of this memorial. We can only infer that he received a respectable though limited education, and that he may have joined either the army or navy and first visited the new world in this capacity. He seems to have come hither by the way of the West Indies, where he probably remained some time, as he afterwards sends his compliments to Admiral Boscawen, whom he says he knew intimately in Jamaica. By some means he acquired a knowledge of the Low Dutch language, which proved of value to him in his subsequent researches among the manuscript Indian records of this province. The earliest ascertained mention of Mr. Wraxall occurs in the year 1746, at which time he was probably not far from twenty-five years of age. During the year just mentioned, he commanded a Long Island company raised for the proposed expedition against Canada, but which marched no further than Albany, the expedition having proved a wretched failure on the part of its leaders, despite the abundant exertions of the colonies. During the next year, 1747, Captain Wraxall asked and obtained leave from Gov. Clinton to visit England on pressing private business, also bearing dispatches from the governor with a highly complimentary letter of introduction to under-secretary Andrew Stone.

After a lapse of five years, during which no record of Mr. Wraxall appears, he was commissioned by the crown as secretary or agent for the government of New York to the Indians, and also as town clerk, clerk of the peace and clerk of the common pleas, for the city and county of Albany. Having formally assumed the secretary-

ship of Indian affairs, he applied to the mayor and common councillors of Albany to be inducted into the clerkship above mentioned, then held by Harme Gansevoort, under authority of a commission granted a few months previously by Gov. Clinton. The mayor and council spent some time in deliberating upon the rival claims of Gansevoort and Wraxall, and finally compromised their action by administering the oath of office to Mr. Wraxall, but leaving him to obtain possession of the papers pertaining thereto, by process of law. The consequence was an appeal to the Lords of Trade, who recommended to the lords justices that the commission granted to Gansevoort by Gov. Clinton be revoked. The lords justices, willing, perhaps, to excuse themselves from any decisive action, left the matter, as we presume, to take its course in the provincial courts. The consequence was a protracted suit, in which Mr. Wraxall spent no small amount of money without ever obtaining any redress for himself, but which his successor, Mr. Witham Marsh, brought to a successful issue.

Meanwhile, Mr. Wraxall assiduously devoted himself to the duties of the office of secretary of Indian affairs, and added to his ordinary labors the preparation of an abridgment of the records of Indian affairs, contained in four folio volumes, transacted in the colony of New York from the year 1678 to the year 1751. This abridgment was designed for the special use of Lord Halifax, and has, almost by accident, been rescued from destruction, and is now preserved as a manuscript volume in one of the secure cases of the New York State Library. These abridged records are the more valuable, from the fact that the original four folio volumes have disappeared from the archives of the state, and it is feared are no longer in existence. The preface to the abridgment furnishes much valuable information, on various subjects connected with Mr. Wraxall's history.

Aside from his official attendance at several Indian conferences in New York and elsewhere, the next mention of Mr. Wraxall is in connection with the first provincial congress, held at Albany in 1754, of which Peter Wraxall was secretary, and Benjamin Franklin and Stephen Hopkins, both subsequently signers of the Declaration of Independence, leading members. In the spring of the following year, 1755, after the council held at Alexandria, under the call of Gen. Braddock, to arrange the plans of the then opening campaign, Gen. (afterwards Sir Wm.) Johnson having been assigned to the command of the Crown Point expedition, wrote to Peter Wraxall earnestly soliciting him to accompany him as his secretary, assigning as a reason, his need of the best service in that capacity, and his entire confidence in Mr. Wraxall's fitness for the position. The invitation was accepted, and Mr. Wraxall entered upon a very laborious and faithful period of service, not only as secretary, but also as the general's aid-de-camp and judge advocate. Sir William testifies in scores of letters to various officials at home and abroad, to the untiring, unrewarded and invaluable labors of this his most valuable friend and ally. Capt. Wraxall was present at the memorable battle of Lake George, on the 8th of September, 1755, at which the French general, Baron Dieskau, was taken prisoner, and for the results of which, as narrated by his secretary, the commanding general was rewarded by the English government with a baronetcy and a donation of £5,000 sterling.

Captain Wraxall's health seems to have been permanently impaired by this campaign, and although he persevered in his official relationship to Sir William, he was much of the time unfit for the field, and some of the time for attendance upon the numerous Indian conferences which, as superintendent of Indian affairs, Sir William had occasion to hold.

During the summer of 1756, part of which he spent in New York, Mr. Wraxall mentioned, in a letter to Sir William, his intention of forming a matrimonial alliance, should health and official duties permit. This intention was carried into effect on the 9th of December, 1756, and Miss Elizabeth Stilwell became his bride. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. Dr. Auchmuty, as we learn from the records of Trinity parish, a transcript of which has been kindly furnished by the present rector, Rev. Dr. Morgan Dix. This union seems to have been, so far as the lasting affection of the parties was concerned, a most happy one, though probably unblessed with children. Mrs. Wraxall continued to reside in New York, in the hired house which had been provided, while Captain Wraxall spent his time, partly at home, and partly with or near Sir William, and Lord Loudoun, the new commander-in-chief, who would have made Mr. Wraxall a member of his military family, had he been disposed to abandon his former superior. His faithful and efficient service was not, however, to be long enjoyed, for on the 11th of July, 1759, after a few days of renewed and painful illness, he closed his eyes in death, probably at the age of about thirty-eight or forty years.

Mr. Wraxall left an undated and unsigned will, a copy of which is filed in the State Hall, from which several items of information have been gathered, and from which it appears that he was possessed of a moderate fortune, ample for the relief of his needy sisters, and to satisfy "the well regulated temperance of her" (Mrs. Wraxall's) "wishes and the wise relish she has of this world," quoting from the will.

Mrs. Wraxall lived in widowhood until June 11, 1763, when she was married to John Maunsell, an officer of the British army. His name, Maunsell, has become the prænomen of several other surnames, as for

example Maunsell B. Field, Maunsell Van Rensselaer, etc., and is found to have been derived in some of these cases from the husband of Elizabeth Wraxall. We have found mention of two brothers-in-law of Captain Wraxall, one a Capt. Smith, who seems to have been at the time stationed at Oswego, and the other Peter De Visure, a merchant of New York city, whose letter to Sir William on the death of "his dearest and ever beloved brother, Peter Wraxall," is on file among the Wm. L. Stone portion of the Johnson manuscripts, in the State Library. Another interesting letter appears in the Cooper portion of the manuscripts, from the bereaved father of the deceased, dated Bristol, Sept. 15, 1760. Mention is made in this letter, and also in a subsequent letter from Mrs. Elizabeth Wraxall to Sir William, of an unfinished manuscript, written by Peter Wraxall during his last years, entitled "Some general thoughts upon the security, the cultivation and the commerce of the northern colonies of America," written in answer to some queries proposed to him by Dean Tucker. It would be a satisfaction to find this manuscript among the Johnson papers, where it doubtless once belonged, but as yet we find no trace of it in any of the several collections which have been procured for the State Library.

A P P E N D I X .

Albany Institute, May 31st, 1870.

Referring to the biographical notice of Peter Wraxall, communicated to the Institute April 16, 1866 (*Proceedings*, vol. I, pp. 28-33), the recording secretary (Mr. Pratt) stated that he had endeavored to gain additional facts respecting Mr. Wraxall's early life, and especially the date of his birth, having made formal inquiry through the *Notes and Queries* of May 19, 1866, to which no answer had been furnished; and having also enlisted the services of Z. Eastman, Esq., U. S. consul at Bristol, Eng., who kindly examined the parish records of that city, and made inquiry through a local newspaper; but that nothing had been reported by him, beyond the discovery of the church yard where the Wraxalls were buried.

It further appears that a present member and officer of the Institute, Mr. Joseph W. Russell, vice-president of the third department, is related, through the maternal line, to Mrs. Wraxall, and that he has inherited several books which seem to have belonged to Peter Wraxall, some of which are inscribed "Elizabeth Wraxall" or "Elizabeth Maunsell," or both.

The subject of the foregoing sketch being an ancestor, by marriage, of several families now residing in this State, seems entitled to a place in our genealogical as well as historical memorials.

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